

Speech given by Laura Esquivel, author of *Like Water for Chocolate*, at a fundraising event for the film *The Other Conquest* (Hacienda de Los Morales, Mexico City).

(A codex is the earliest type of manuscript in modern book form; the written language of the ancient Aztecs of Mexico consisted of pictograms which they skillfully drew on their codices.)

Films are to our time what codices were to theirs: the quintessential pictographic manifestation. Both use the language of images as a means of expression. Both are the best weapon against oblivion. Both narrate significant histories through the eyes of an artist, and that is the first thing that seduced me about Salvador and Alvaro's project: the power of their images, the story and the history they are depicting, the poetic violence they use, the absolved vision of *The Other Conquest*.

When I read Salvador's original screenplay, I was impressed by the absolute correspondence between the images on the screen and the images on paper, and even more significantly, by the great interest of these young filmmakers to rescue from oblivion the scenes of what we once were. They were doing this against all odds; with the same passion and dedication shown by Topiltzin, the protagonist of their film. And believe me, they have suffered as much as him to accomplish their objectives. They have struggled incessantly, like two authentic eagle warriors. They have confronted every imaginable kind of obstacle: economical, institutional, social, even passional. Perhaps the reason for this is their honesty, their strength and integrity; but in any case, it is admirable that this long period of waiting has not hurt their friendship, lessened their enthusiasm, or faded their energy. The only thing that it has actually done has been to strengthen them, and to assert their need of dealing with the complex subject of mestizaje -the fusion of the Spanish and Indigenous cultures- a mestizaje that took place between men and women who sheltered in their eyes landscapes, colors, completely different faces. A mestizaje where the eye was the element of union.

I've always been interested in everything related to the eyes. I believe that the gaze of the eye is constantly being created. Artistic manifestations form the gaze they need in order to be understood. Before Picasso, there wasn't an eye capable of appreciating cubism. In order to understand film conventions, a certain vision of the world had to be developed. Only thus could people accept cuts, dissolves, time ellipses. Cinematic language was not created at random. We find its antecedents in different artistic manifestations, particularly in photography and literature. Before other countries, and the United States in particular, became interested in the gaze of Latin American filmmakers, they were interested in our literature. That was how the world came to know the vision of the eyes of Cortázar, García Márquez, Paz, Borges, Neruda, Carpentier, Lezama Lima, Miguel Angel Asturias, and Fuentes, among others.

Curiously enough, the language they were using in their writing, which felt so ours, the language that reflected so precisely the world we live in, was not our original language. It was given to us by the Conquerors. Before them, our eyes were accustomed to understanding the language of stars; the architecture and sculpture of the Mayans, Toltecs, Zapotecs, Aztecs; the language of codices. Codices were written by people interested in leaving behind a testimony to what their eyes had seen. Thanks to them, we know the profound cosmic vision developed by ancient generations. Our eyes have been conquered by cinema, and we can not deny that film language has been created to a great extent by American cinema and its industry. The entire world has seen films through the eyes of their directors. American film schools have influenced not only the greater public but also creators everywhere. But again, it is through this language, that has been imposed on us, that we Latin Americans will continue to express and reflect on what we are, what we have never ceased to be, what we will continue being beyond any convention. What matters is the gaze, not the language we use to express it. It is the eyes of the filmmakers what gives consistency to Latin American cinema.

I find that films are the codices of today, and that there is an extraordinary coincidence of factors in Salvador and Alvaro's film. Topiltzin, Aztec scribe, who draws in codices the story of his people, sees his life and work affected by the Conquest. Salvador and Alvaro draw images that show Topiltzin's past by using the Conqueror's language -film language- creating thus a new codex. The three of them are driven by their need to show what we once were through a visual language. What we see transforms us forever. We are not the same after having seen a birth or a death. Spaniards can not have been the same after seeing the Great Mexico-Tenochtitlan. Aztecs can not have been the same after seeing it disappear. In the film, Topiltzin is not the same after seeing the Icon of the Virgin Mary; Friar Diego is not the same after seeing the codex... And you will not be the same after seeing this film. If Friar Diego felt the historical responsibility of preserving the codex; if Topiltzin found in contemplating the Icon what he believed to be lost, I am sure that all of you, like myself, will feel the need of supporting this project, which will assure future generations the possibility of seeing a memorable vision of the other conquest. Thank you very much.

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